



Walk/ Bike Northampton: Engagement Progress Report

April 2016

Background Information

Project Purpose:

In 2003 Northampton (in partnership with the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission) developed its' first comprehensive transportation plan. This plan sought to assure a balanced transportation system for the city. It has been recognized by the National Complete Streets Coalition as a Complete Streets policy; however, it does not detail precisely where and how the City can transform its existing streets and sidewalks to make them complete. Over time Northampton's interest in and commitment to all aspects of sustainability grew and the city completed a comprehensive sustainability plan in 2008. Additionally, the city has a build-out vision for its rail trail/multi-use trail plan in its Open Space, Recreation and Multi-Use Trail Plan. At this time the city is ready to advance to the next stage of sustainable transportation for every neighborhood and every street, as the city's goal is to create a ten year plan detailing where to build trails, sidewalks, and complete streets infrastructure.

Engaging the entire community successfully goes to the very core of this project. In the development of an Equity-Focused Complete Streets Pedestrian and Bicycle plan, Northampton is committed to involving a cross-section of the community to work together and collaborate on this project. Recognizing that there are many reasons why the populations too often left out of traditional planning processes do not participate, the City and PVPC jointly secured \$50,000—\$25,000 from the Funders Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities with a matching \$25,000 from the Community Foundation of Western Massachusetts—to work towards reducing the barriers impeding participation.

Project Goals:

Through this process, the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission plans to achieve the following:

1. To engage people too often left out of traditional planning processes in the Walk/Bike Northampton Plan
2. Develop capacity among underrepresented leaders to actively participate in local government
3. Make recommendations to the City on how to change practices to improve citizen participation in government planning processes. We refer to this work as “re-energizing democracy”

Summary of Tasks:

The following is a snapshot of tasks completed to date. Each task is explained in detail in the remainder of this report.

Achievements to Date:

- Participation in Walk/Bike Northampton Public Forum #1
- Launched survey on state of engagement practices in Northampton's planning processes, with 78 respondents participating thus far.
- Focus Group at Casa Latina
- Door-to-door flyer at Northampton Housing Authority's seven properties
- Launched Wiki-map
- Collaboration with the City's Human Rights Commission
- Hosted drop-in meetings at seven Northampton Housing Authority properties

Upcoming Tasks

- Identify emerging leaders from Northampton's marginalized communities who are interested in capacity building
- Engagement activities with the Center for New Americans

Achievements to Date

Participation in Public Forum # 1:

PVPC staff participated in the first Walk/Bike Northampton public forum on March 7. While the meeting was well attended, the populations in attendance included only of the populations that typically participate in the City of Northampton's planning processes (white, upper-middle class, highly educated, older adults)—highlighting the need for this work.

PVPC staff distributed a survey at this public forum that assessed participants' ideas attitudes, and behaviors with respect to their participation in government planning processes. Seventy-eight people in attendance completed and returned the survey. Preliminary findings can be found on page 5 of this report. It should be noted that this survey will also be available online and at future engagement events. Thus, the results and findings are likely to evolve with a greater diversity in the population responding.

PVPC worked with the UMass Translation Center and Pioneer Valley interpreters to offer Spanish translation services and engaged a local childcare provider to offer childcare at this meeting. The translation services were not used. The childcare was well-received. Some families reported that the presence of childcare made it possible for them to participate in this meeting. Both translation services and childcare will be available at the upcoming forum and design workshop in May and have been included in advertising efforts.

Focus Group at Casa Latina:

PVPC staff worked with Casa Latina to host a focus group on Tuesday, March, 29th. Participants were invited to share a meal, talk about what walking and biking around Northampton is like for them and participate in a map based activity. There were approximately ten people in attendance. The group was mostly women that play an active



role in their communities. They expressed that they felt knowledgeable enough to speak on behalf of Northampton's Latino population. (PVPC staff acknowledges that this group may not be representative of the entire Latino population and hope to capture more of that perspective in evening drop-in meetings throughout the month of April.)

While there were activities planned for the evening, the attendees were much more interested in having a dialogue about the challenges they, along with their children, other family members, and friends face when walking or biking in Northampton and ideas that they had for improvements. A few key themes emerged. While not directly related to walking and biking, participants shared that **transit improvements are very important and they believe that more Latino residents use transit than walking and bicycling as their primary means of transportation.** They also shared that they **don't feel comfortable going to and hanging out in downtown Northampton.** For example, some participants stated that even though they live in Northampton, they are much more likely to spend time in Holyoke where they feel accepted by the community.

Achievements to Date

Open House at Casa Latina Cont.:

Three major themes arose from the conversation regarding walking and bicycling:

- **Infrastructure improvements should be prioritized near parks and schools.** Many of the schools lack sidewalks on the streets surrounding them, making it more challenging for children to walk or ride a bicycle to school. There are also a number of parks that lack sidewalks or bike lanes connecting to the neighborhoods. Participants shared that they will drive their car from their house to the nearest park in order to walk for exercise, but would be more likely to walk to the park if there were better sidewalk connections.
- **Many participants enjoy the bike paths in the city, but feel that they could be improved with better connections and amenities.** Some shared that they would like to see bike lanes and sidewalks leading to the paths. There was also a discussion of lighting, bicycle parking, and bike fix-it stations that would make the bike paths more enjoyable spaces.
- **Better education for all people (drivers, pedestrians, and cyclists) is needed.** There was a consensus that drivers, cyclists and pedestrians could all use a primer on the rules of the road. There were concerns about distracted drivers and jaywalking pedestrians. A few of the participants were also parents and suggested that education in the schools on walking and biking might be the most effective because the children are likely to come home and excitedly share what they learned with their parents.

Door to Door Outreach:

Between March 29 and April 8, PVPC staff went door to door in seven Northampton Housing Authority properties with information about upcoming meetings. If residents were home, we shared information about Northampton's efforts to create a bike and pedestrian plan and outlined when we would be in their community seeking input. Some of the residents that we spoke with were interested in the work being done and

expressed excitement that the meetings would be held in their building. If residents were not home, a flier that was in both English and Spanish, advertising the upcoming meetings was left at their door.

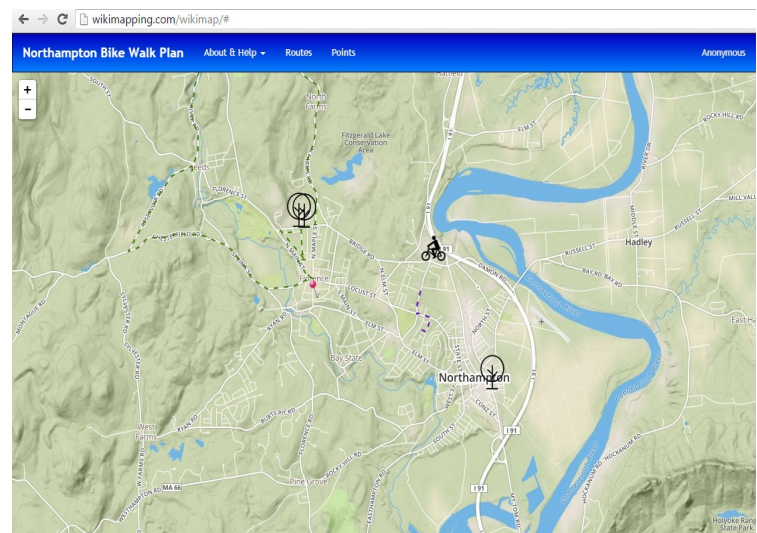
Wiki-mapping Launched:

On April 8, PVPC launched a wiki-mapping application that allows users to share spatial information regarding bicycling and walking. Residents and visitors to the city can use the map to mark routes that are good for walking or biking or point out places that need improvements like sidewalks, crosswalks, bike lanes, or new street trees. This wiki-map can be found here: <http://wikimapping.com/wikimap/WalkBike-Northampton-Plan.html>

The map was publicized through a press release, the city's email list and a number of email lists for prominent community organizations. We are seeking additional ways to publicize the wiki-map.

About 90 people have already contributed to the map. Demographic data collected by the wiki-map's survey shows that participants are more highly-educated and have a higher income than an average resident of Northampton.

Screenshot of Wiki-mapping project website.



Achievements to Date

Collaboration with the Human Rights Commission:

PVPC is also working with the City's Human Rights Commission (HRC) on engagement of marginalized populations in the Walk/Bike Northampton plan development process, as well as in the effort to re-energize democracy in the City. Staff have presented twice to the HRC.

Drop-in Meetings at Northampton Housing Authority's Seven Communities:

Between April 11th and the 20th, PVPC staff held drop-in meetings at the following Northampton Housing Authority properties: Cahill Apartments, Florence Heights Apartments, Forsander Apartments, Hampshire Heights Apartments, McDonald House, Salvo House, and Tobin Manor.

Meetings were held in each building's community room from 5:00-7:00pm. Residents were invited to share their ideas and concerns regarding walking and biking, take surveys, and ask questions. Over the course of the seven meetings, approximately 90 people provided input. There was a strong representation of youth and elderly, as well as individuals with mobility issues.



Residents at Cahill Apartments



Children at Florence Heights Apartments enjoy pizza, while they talk about walking and bicycling.

A brief description of each meeting follows and complete notes are available.

Cahill Apartments

Four people who came in and clearly had been planning to come since they received the flier at their door. Plus 4 drop ins. Significant amount of detailed and substantive input was received.

Florence Heights Apartments

Community room is a small unit at the far end of the development near the play ground and basketball courts. The weather was good so we were outside, which was good, because otherwise it would have been hard for people to know we were there. Core group of young people and a few parents participated and encouraged others to participate. A smaller number of very specific comments were received.

Forsander Apartments

President of tenant association had clearly invested time in promoting the meeting. Because they are located on the bike path, bike path comments tended to dominate. Core group stayed for 1.5 hours with a few drop-ins. No one had a particular axe to grind, but over the course of the meeting.

Achievements to Date



Children at Hampshire Heights Apartments writing down their thoughts.

Hampshire Heights Apartments

Core group of five young people and their parents, plus drop in young people and a few neighbors attended. Community room is a small unit at one 'cul de sac' of the development, but weather was good so we were outside and very visible to passers by. Very different input from previous 3 locations, because of young people. Input was more spontaneous, and in response to questions.

McDonald House

Smaller group of committed residents. Meeting time overlapped with regularly scheduled bingo event. Able to get input from residents waiting for bingo to begin. Most concerned with traffic downtown and challenges navigating the nearby area in a wheelchair or with a walker.

“All I do is complain and this meeting has reenergized my faith in democracy.”

-Resident at Forsander

“I wish there were sidewalks so I could walk to school.”

-Dion and Jomar, youth at
Florence Heights

Salvo House

Community room is a large cafeteria and you have to go through the TV room to get to it. Motivated core group of 12 people stayed a minimum of 45 minutes and some whole time, plus 7 passers by who stayed a range of 3-20 minutes. Significant, meaningful, detailed input was received.

Tobin Manor

Our presence canceled Bingo! Bad idea, but the group was very forgiving and well organized. They had made their own sign for the meeting and a core group of 8 arrived right on time and actively participated for about an hour. There were drop ins over the course of the 2 hours.



Sign made by
Forsander Tenant
Association
advertising
our meeting

Preliminary Survey Results

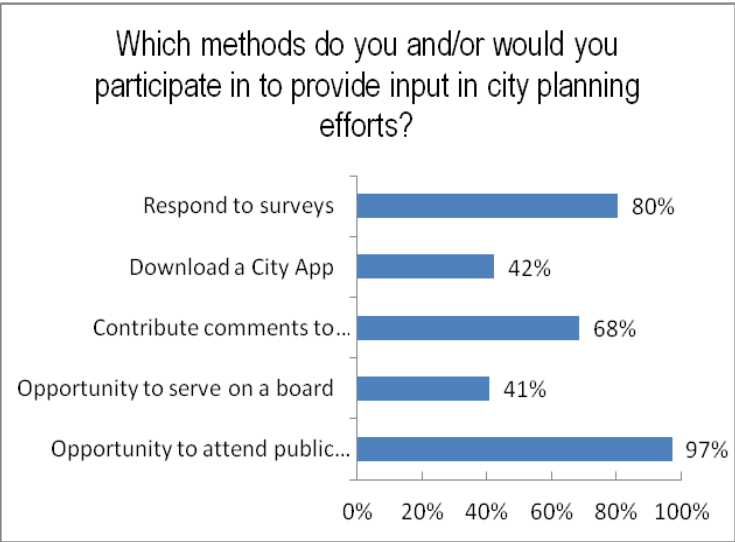
Survey Results:

Residents in Attendance:

Almost all attendees identified Northampton as their place of residence. A few attendees, however, identified that they were from other places in the region including Easthampton, Amherst, Greenfield and Belchertown. This suggests that there is interest in the bike and pedestrian planning that happens in Northampton from beyond its borders.

Current/ Preferred Engagement Techniques:

Respondents were asked to select the types of participation they currently take part in or that they would be willing to take part in in the future. There was a high response rate for the traditional means of engagement (Public meeting, responding to surveys and commenting directly to staff). A direct conclusion that the status quo is functioning well should not be drawn. This question paired both current and preferred methods and because all respondents were filling out a survey at a public forum, they were likely to select that box.

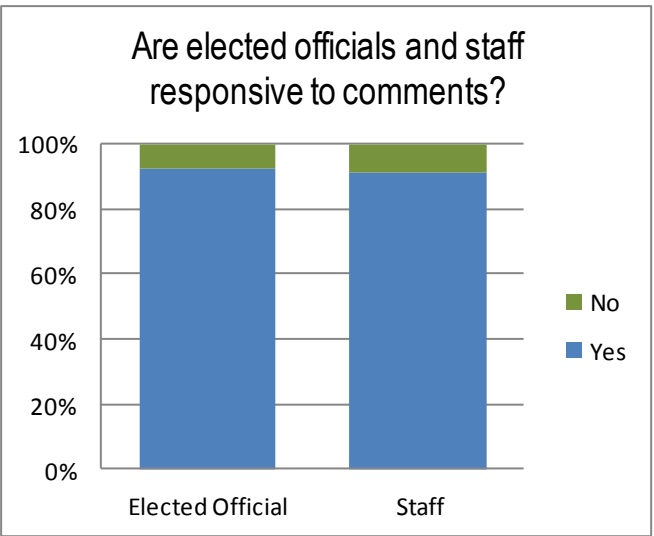


Approximately 42 % of respondents said that they would participate using a smart phone app. Written comments either expressed a strong disdain for the app or suggested that it should also be available on the internet so that those with a smart phone can participate.

Navigating Government Infrastructure:

Respondents who attended the first public forum appear to understand how to navigate through the existing government structures in order to have their voices heard. Sixty percent of respondents who would be willing to serve on a committee know how to do so. Additionally almost 70% of respondents agreed that they know how to contact or reach an elected official or staff member in order to share their thoughts.

Beyond just knowing how to share their comments and get involved, many participants felt that the city was responsive to their comments. Ninety-two percent of respondents felt that elected officials were responsive, while 91% of respondents felt that staff were responsive.



Preliminary Survey Results Cont.

Challenges Impeding Engagement:

Respondents were asked to identify the challenges that they face when participating in the city's planning processes. Top responses included not having the time to participate, not knowing how to participate or not receiving information about opportunities to participate. These challenges can be remedied by more effective communication. Articulating how and when there are opportunities for structured participation and what the participant will be expected to do could help lower the barriers to participation. Other barriers to participation include the long time frames tied to planning processes and the inability to often track how these particular forums impact the end results.

Very few respondents (1.79%) cited an unwelcoming environment as a challenge to participation. They also didn't feel that the language used by decision makers or staff members was confusing to understand. Access to transportation to get to meetings was also identified as a very low challenge to participating. Some respondents commented that they felt very welcomed when they come to participate and others shared that they appreciated the child care provided on site.

These results likely only tell part of the story. The people at these meetings clearly knew where to be and when in order to participate. Upcoming engagement efforts with the commonly unengaged can be used to understand if these speculations are accurate or if there are other challenges not identified here.

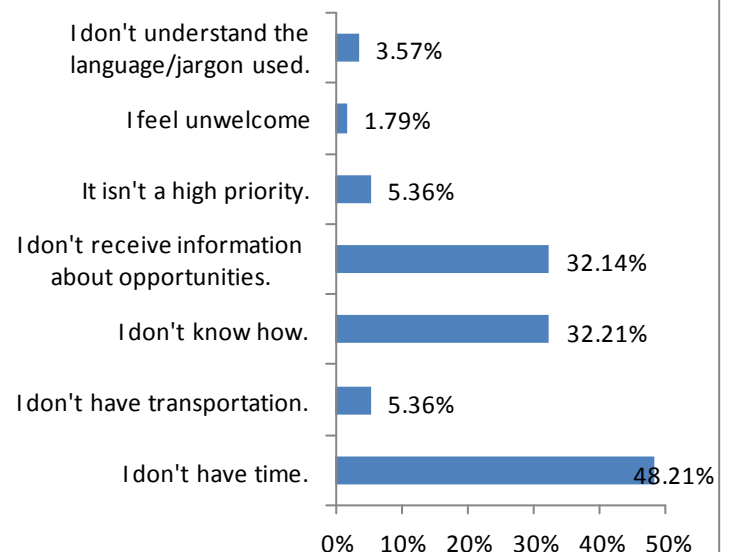
"Thank you for providing day care!! On site."

"I would love to see a meeting like this at a low-income housing community with Spanish translation."

"The bike/ped subcommittee meets early in the morning. The transportation committee meets at 4pm. I would have to leave work early."

"Want to see results. I wonder if these meetings result in anything."

What are the challenges you face in participating in city planning processes?



Preliminary Survey Results Cont.

Engaging friends, families, and neighbors

Respondents were asked to identify things that they believed would help get family, friends and neighbors engaged in City planning processes. A major theme was engagement at the neighborhood level. Approximately 71% of respondents wanted meeting in their neighborhood in addition to a large community-wide meeting.

Respondents also echoed the need for better publicity. When asked which forms of publicity they felt would be the most preferable, email or text sign up services that send out information and reminders was the most popular option, followed by information disseminated through Ward/City Councilors.

Respondents also responded favorably to the idea of a Northampton Resident Engagement Team, which would leverage volunteers who would serve as liaisons between citizens and government. Respondents even identified that this was something they would volunteer to be a part of it were to exist.